

# AYESHA THE FURTHILL OF CHINA

## HISTORY OF CHINA

### BY H. RIDER HAGGARD



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#### SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

Leo Vinney and Horace Holly make their way back to England after their terrible adventures in Kor, but the spirit of unrest is in them, and Leo especially turns to see his last love once more—his, he remembers, when Ayesha perished in the flames of the Pillar of Life she called to her lover that she would come again and would once more be beautiful. Finally, tortured by uncertainty, Leo is on the verge of taking his life, when a vision comes to him in which he sees Ayesha and is guided by her to where she may be found. The place seems to be in Asia, and the distinguishing feature is a fire-crowned mountain peak. The two men go in search of this, and after sixteen years' wandering come to a lamasery in Tibet, where they find an ancient lama named Kou-en, who professes to have seen, long years before, a woman who answers the description of "She," and who seemed to possess some of her power. He tells the two travelers that he believes this mysterious woman may be found on the farther side of a well-nigh impassable mountain range. Neither they journey, and after frightful hardships reach the land of Kachou, where they are hospitably received by Ateu, the Khan, or queen. They learn that on the fire-crowned mountain, which they are in search of, and which is not far away, is what is known as the College of Hesi, and an ever-burning fire, tended by a mysterious priestess, who is always veiled. The inhabitants of Kachou and the people of the mountain have long been on unfriendly terms, but there is now a sort of armed truce, both sides agreeing not to invade each other's territory under penalty of war. By some means the veiled priestess has learned of the coming of the two strangers across the mountain, and has sent word to that effect to the Khan, together with the demand that they be sent to her. But Ateu falls in love with Leo and resolves to wed him, even though this will necessitate her doing away with her present husband; as she sends the veiled priestess word that the strangers have arrived, but that they are both very old and so physically worn that they will be unable to obey her behest to come at once to her domain. Holly soon discovers that the beautiful Ateu is in love with Leo, and is a cunning and ambitious woman, who is determined to have him for her own. She is surrounded by a band of natives, whose threatened attack is only averted by the impulsive yet silent gesture of the masked woman who throws herself between them.

#### CHAPTER XII—(Continued).

At sight of his down on to their faces went these wild men, everyone of them as though a lightning stroke had in an instant swept them out of existence. Then she let her arm fall and beckoned, whereon a great fellow, who, I suppose, was the leader of the band, rose and crept toward her with bowed head, and himself as a beaten dog. To him she made signs, pointing to us, pointing to the far-off peak, crossing and uncrossing his white-wrapped arms, but so far as I could hear, speaking no word. It was evident that the chief understood her, however, for he said something in a guttural language. Then he uttered his shrill whistle, whereon the band arose and departed thence at full speed, this way and that, so that in another minute they had vanished as quickly as they came.

Now our guide motioned to us to proceed, and led the way upward as calmly as though nothing had happened.

For over two hours we went on thus, till our path brought us from the ravine on to a grassy declivity, across which it wound its way. Here, to our astonishment, we found a fire burning, and hanging above the fire an earthenware pot, which was on the bed, attended as could see no man tending it. The figure signaled to me to dismount, pointing to the pot, in token that we were to eat the food which doubtless she had ordered the wild men to prepare for us, and very glad was I to obey her. Provision had been made for the horses, also, for near the fire lay a great bundle of green forage.

While Leo off-saddled the beast and spread the provender for it, taking with me a spare earthen vessel that lay ready, I went to the edge of the torrent to drink and steep my wounded arm in the ice-cold stream. This relieved me greatly, though by now I was sure, from various symptoms, that the brute Master's fangs had fortunately only broken or injured the small bone, a discovery for which I was thankful enough. Having finished attending to it as well as I was able, I filled the jar with water.

On my way back a thought struck me, and going to where our mysterious guide stood still as Leo's wife after she had been turned into a pillar of salt, I

open gateway and a little to the right of it, she motioned to us to stop. Then she went to a low place in the wall and stood there, as though she were considering the scene beyond. It seemed to us, indeed, that she saw what she had not expected, and was thereby perplexed or angered. Presently she appeared to make up her mind, for again she motioned to us to remain where we were, enjoining silence, as by placing her swathed hand upon the mask that hid her face. Next moment she was gone. How she went, or whither, I cannot say; all we knew was that she was no longer there.

"What shall we do now?" whispered Leo to me.

"Stay where we are till she comes back again or something happens," I answered.

So there being nothing else to be done, we stayed, hoping that the horse would not betray us by neighing, or that we might not be otherwise discovered, since we were certain that if so we should be in danger of our lives. Very soon, however, we forgot the anxiety of our own position in the study of the wild scene before us, which now began to develop a fearful interest.

It would seem that what has been drama itself, and that this drama was scribbled but preliminary to the trial of certain people for their lives. This we could guess, for after a while the incantation ceased and the crowd in front of the big man with the cat upon his head opened out, while behind him a column of smoke rose into the air, as though light had been set to some sunk furnace.

Into the space that had thus been cleared were now led seven persons, whose hands were tied behind them. They were of both sexes, and included an old man and a woman with a tall and handsome figure, who appeared to be quite young, scarcely more than a girl indeed. These seven were ranged in a line where they stood, clearly in great fear, for the old man fell upon his knees, and one of the women began to sob. Thus they were left a while, perhaps to allow the fire behind them to burn up, which it soon did with great fierceness, throwing a vivid light upon every detail of the spectacle.

Now all was ready, and a man brought a wooden tray to the red-bearded priest, who was seated on a stool, the white cat upon his knees, whither he had seen it leap from his head a little while before. He took the tray by its handles, and at a word from him the cat jumped on to it and sat there. Then amid the most intense silence he rose and uttered some prayer, apparently to the cat, which sat facing him. This done he turned the tray round so that the creature's back was now toward him, and, advancing to the line of prisoners, began to walk up and down in front of them, which he did several times, at each turn drawing a little nearer.

Holding out the tray, he presented it at the face of the prisoner on the left, whereon the cat rose, arched its back and began to lift its paws up and down. Presently he moved to the next prisoner and held it before him a while, and so on till he came to the fifth, that young woman of whom I have spoken. Now the cat grew very angry, for in the deathlike stillness we could hear it spitting and growling. At length it seemed to lift its paws and strike the girl upon the face, whereon she screamed aloud, a terrible scream. Then all the audience broke out into a shout, a single word, which we understood, for we had heard one very like it used by the people of the plain. It was "Witch! Witch!"

Executioners who were waiting for the victim to be chosen in this ordeal by cat, rushed forward, and, seizing the girl, began to drag her toward the fire. The prisoner who was standing by her and whom we rightly guessed to be her husband, tried to protect her, but his arms being bound, poor fellow, he could do nothing. One of the executioners knocked him down with a stick. For a moment his wife escaped and threw herself upon him, but the brutes lifted her up again, haling her toward the fire, while all the audience shouted wildly.

"I can't stand this," said Leo; "it's murder—cold-blooded murder," and he drew his sword.

"Best leave the beasts alone," I answered, doubtfully, though my own blood was boiling in my veins.

Whether he heard or not I do not know, for the next thing I saw was Leo rushing through the gate waving the Khan's sword and shouting at the top of his voice. Then I struck my heels into the ribs of the horse and followed after him. In ten seconds we were among them. As we came, the savages fell back this way and that, staring at us amazed, for at first I think they took us for apparitions. Thus, Leo on foot and I galloping after him, we came to the place.

The executioners and their victim were near the fire now—a very great fire of resinous pine logs built in a pit that measured about eight feet across. Close to it sat the priest upon his stool, watching the scene with a cruel smile, and rewarding the cat with little goblets of raw meat, that he took from a leathern pouch at his side, occupations in which he was so deeply engaged that he never saw us until we were right on to him.

Shouting, "Leave her alone, you blackguards!" Leo rushed at the executioners, and with a single blow of his sword severed the arm of one of them, who gripped the woman by the nape of the neck.

With a yell of pain and rage the man sprang back and stood waving the stump toward the people and staring at it wildly. In the confusion that followed, I saw the victim slip from the hands of her astonished would-be murderers and run into the darkness, where she vanished. Also I saw the witch-doctor spring up, still holding the tray on which the cat was sitting, and heard him begin to shout a perfect torrent of furious abuse at Leo, who in reply waved his hand, and as he swung, shouting something like "Ho, hah, ho!" When he bent toward the audience it bent toward him, and every time he straightened himself it echoed his final shout of "Ho!" in a volume of sound that made the precipices ring. Nor was this all, for perched upon his hairy head, with arched back and waving tail, stood a great white cat.

Anything stranger, and indeed more fantastic, than the general effect of this scene, lit by the bright moonlight and set in that wild arena, it was never my lot to witness. The red-haired, half-naked men, and women, the gigantic priest, the mystical white cat, that gripping his scalp with its claws, waved its tail and seemed to take a part in the performance; the unholy chant and its wailing chorus, all helped to make it extraordinarily impressive. This struck us the more, perhaps, because at the time we could not in the least guess its significance, though we imagined that it must be preliminary to some sacrifice or offering. It was like the fragment of a nightmare preserved by the awakened senses in all its mad, meaningless reality.

Now round the open space, where these savages were celebrating their worship, or whatever it might be, ran a rough stone wall about six feet in height, in which wall was a gateway. Toward this we advanced quite unseen, for upon our side of the wall grew many stunted pines. Through these pines our guide led us, till in the thick of them, some few yards from the

heart of the fire, for he was mad with rage and knew not what he did.

At the sight of that awful sacrilege—for such it was to them who worshipped this beast—a gasp of horror rose from the spectators, followed by a howl of execration. Then like a wave of the sea they rushed at us. I saw Leo cut one man down, and next instant I was off the horse and being dragged toward the furnace. At the edge of it I met Leo in like plight, but fighting furiously, for his strength was great and they were half afraid of him.

"Why couldn't you leave the cat alone?" I shouted at him in idiotic remonstrance, for my brain had gone, and all I knew was that we were about to be thrown into the fiery pit. Already I was over it; I felt the flames sting my hair and saw its red caverns awaiting me, when of a sudden the brutal hands that held me were unloosed, and I fell backward to the ground, where I lay staring upward.

"This was what I saw," standing in

But still the wretch writhed before the draped form and howled for mercy.

"Messenger," said the high priest "with thee the power goes. Declare thy decree."

Then our guide lifted her hand slowly and pointed to the fire. At once the man turned ghastly white, groaned and fell back, as I think, quite dead, slain by his own terror.

Now many of the people had fled, but some remained, and to these the priest called in cold tones, bidding them approach. They obeyed, creeping toward him.

"Look," he said, pointing to the man, "look and tremble at the justice of Hesi, the mother. Ay, and be sure that as it is with him, so shall it be with every one of you who dares to defy her and to practice sorcery and murder. Lift up that dead dog who was your chief."

Some of them crept forward and did his bidding.

"Now, cast him into the bed which he had made ready for his victims."



Now the Cat Grew Very Angry, for in the Deathlike Stillness We Could Hear It Spitting and Growling. At Length It Seemed to Lift Its Paws and Strike the Girl Upon the Face.

front of the fire, her draped form quivering as though with rage, was our ghostly-looking guide, who pointed her hand at the gigantic, red-headed witch-doctor. But she was no longer alone, for with her were a score or more of men clad in white robes and armed with swords; black-eyed, ascetic-looking men, with clean-shaven heads and faces.

At the sight of them terror had seized their multitude which, mad as goaded bulls but a few seconds before, now fled in every direction like sheep frightened by a wolf. The leader of the white-robed priests, a man with a gentle face, which when at rest was clothed in a perpetual smile, and I understood something of his talk.

"Dog," he said in effect, speaking in a smooth, measured voice that yet was terrible, "accursed dog, beast-worshiper, what were you about to do to the guests of the mighty mother of the mountain? Is it for this that you and your idolatries have been spared so long? Answer, if you have anything to say. Answer quickly, for your time is short."

With a groan of fear the great fellow flung himself upon his knees, not to the high priest who questioned him, but before the quivering shape of our guide, and to her put up half-articulate prayers for mercy.

"Cease," said the high priest, "she is the minister who judges and the sword that strikes. I am the ears and the voice. Speak and tell me—were you about to cast those men, whom you were commanded to receive hospitably, into the quivering shape of our guide, and to her put up half-articulate prayers for mercy?"

Staggering forward to the edge of the flaming pit, they obeyed, and the great body fell with a crash among the burning boughs and vanished there.

"Listen, you people," said the priest, "and learn that this man deserved his dreadful doom. Know you why he was put to death? Because his familiar marked her as a witch, you think. I tell you it was not so. It was because she being fair, he would have taken her from her husband, as he had taken many another, and she refused him. But the eye saw, the voice spoke, and the Messenger did judgment. He is caught in his own snare, and so shall you be, every one of you who dares to think evil in his heart or to do it with his hands."

"Such is the just decree of the Hesi, spoken by her from her throne amid the fires of the mountain."

#### CHAPTER XIII.

##### Beneath the Shadowing Wings.

One by one the terrified tribesmen crept away. When the last of them were gone the priest advanced to Leo and saluted him by placing his hand upon his forehead.

"Lord," he said, in the same corrupt Gredan dialect which was used by the courtiers of Kachou, "I will not ask if you are hurt, since from the moment that you entered the sacred river and set foot within this land, you and your companion were protected by a power inviolable and could not be harmed by man or spirit, however great may have been your danger. Yet vile hands have been laid upon you, and this is the command of the mother whom I serve, that, if you desire it, every one of those men who touched you shall die before your eyes. Say, is that your will?"

"Nay," answered Leo; "they were mad and blind, let no blood be shed for us. All we ask of you, friend—but, how are you called?"

"Name me Oros," he answered.

"Friend Oros—a good title for one who dwells upon the mountain—all we ask is food and shelter, and to be led swiftly into the presence of her whom you name mother, that oracle whose wisdom we have traveled far to seek."

He bowed and answered: "The good and shelter are prepared, and tomorrow, when you have rested, I am commanded to conduct you whither you desire to be. Follow me, I pray you," and he preceded us past the fiery pit to a building that stood about fifty yards away against the rock wall of the amphitheater.

It would seem that it was a guest house, or at least had been made ready to serve that purpose, as in it lamps were lit and a fire burned, for here the air was warm.

The house was divided into two rooms, the second of them a sleeping place, to which he led us through the first.

speaking. Then blind with weariness, we returned to the other chamber, and, having removed our outer garments, flung ourselves upon the beds and were soon plunged in sleep.

At some time in the night I woke suddenly, at what hour I do not know, as certain people wake, I among them, when their room is entered, even without the slightest noise. Before I opened my eyes I felt that some one was with us in the place. Nor was I mistaken. A little lamp still burned in the chamber, a mere wick floating in oil, and by its light I saw a dim, ghost-like form standing near the door. Indeed, I thought almost that it was a ghost, till presently I remembered, and knew it for our corpse-like guide, who appeared to be looking intently at the bed on which Leo lay, or so I thought, for the head was bent in that direction.

At first she was quite still, then she moaned aloud, a low and terrible moan, which seemed to well from the very heart.

So the thing was not dumb, as I had believed. Evidently it could suffer, and express its sufferings in a human fashion. Look! it was wringing its padded hands, as in an excess of woe. Now it would seem that Leo began to feel its influence also, for he stirred and spoke in his sleep, so low at first that I could only distinguish the tongue he used, which was Arabic. Presently I caught a few words.

"Ayesha," he said, "Ayesha!"

The figure glided toward him and stopped. He sat up in the bed still fast asleep, for his eyes were shut. He stretched out his arms as though seeking one whom he would embrace, and spoke again in a low and passionate voice:

"Ayesha, through life and death I have sought thee long. Come to me, my goddess, my desired."

The figure glided yet nearer, and I could see that it was trembling, and now its arms were extended also.

At the bedside she halted, and Leo laid himself down again. Now the coverings had fallen back, exposing his breast, where lay the leather satchel he always wore, that which contained the lock of Ayesha's hair. He was fast asleep, and the figure seemed to fix its eyes upon this satchel. Presently it did more, for with surprising deftness those white-wrapped fingers opened its clasp, yes, and drew out the long tress of shining hair. Long and cunningly she wove it with the leather satchel, the relic, closed the satchel, and for a little while seemed to weep. While she stood thus, the dreaming Leo once more stretched out his arms and spoke, saying, in the same passion-laden voice:

"Come to me, my darling, my beautiful, my beautiful!"

At those words, with a little muffled scream, like that of a scared night-bird, the figure turned and fled through the doorway.

When I was quite certain that she had gone, I gasped aloud.

What might this mean, I wondered, in a very agony of self-wonderment. This could certainly be no dream; it was real, for I was wide awake. Indeed, what did it all mean? Who was the ghastly, mummy-like thing which had glided us unharmed through such terrible dangers; the messenger that all men feared, who could strike down a brawny savage with a motion of his hand? Why did it creep into the place thus at dead of night, like a spirit revisiting one beloved? Why did its presence cause me to awake and Leo to dream? Why did it draw out the tress; indeed, how knew it that this tress was hidden there? And why—oh! why, at those tender and passionate words, did it flee away at last like some scared bat?

The priest Oros had called our guide minister, and sword—that is, one who carries out decrees. But what if they were its own decrees? What if this thing should be she whom we sought, Ayesha herself? Why should I tremble at the thought, seeing that if so, our quest was ended, and we had saved her? It must be because about this being there was something terrible, something unhuman and appalling. If Ayesha lived within those mummy cloths, then it was a different Ayesha whom we had known and worshipped. Well could I remember the white-draped form of remembrance—Obedient, and how, long before she revealed her glorious face to us, we guessed the beauty and the majesty hidden beneath that veil by which her radiant life and loveliness incarnate could not be disguised.

But what of this creature? I would not pursue the thought; I was mistaken. Doubtless she was what the priest Oros had said—some half-supernatural being to whom certain powers were given, and, doubtless, she had come to spy on us in our rest that she might make report to the giver of those powers.

Comforting myself thus, I fell asleep again, for fatigue overcame even such doubts and fears. The morning, when they were naturally less vivid, came up my mind that, for various reasons, it would be wisest to say nothing of what I had seen to Leo. Nor, indeed, did I do so until some days had gone by.

When I awoke, the full light was pouring into the chamber, and by it I saw the priest Oros standing at my bedside. I sat up and asked him what time it was, to which he answered with a smile, but in a low voice, that it lacked but two hours of midday, adding that he had come to set my arm. Now I saw why he spoke low, for Leo was still fast asleep.

"Let him rest on," he said, as he undid the wrappings on my arm, "for he has suffered much, and he is continued, significantly, 'may still have more to suffer.'"

"What do you mean, friend Oros?" I asked, sharply. "I thought you told us that we were safe upon this mountain."

"I told you, friend—and he looked at 'Holly is my name.'"

"Friend Holly, that your bodies are safe, I said nothing of all the rest of you. Man is more than flesh and blood. He is mind and spirit as well, and these can be injured also."

"Who is there that would 'injure' them?" I asked.

"Friend," he answered, gravely, "you and your companion have been to a haunted land, not as mere wanderers, for then you would be dead ere now, but of set purpose seeking to lift the veil from mysteries which have been hid for ages. Well, your arm is known, and it may chance that it will be achieved. But if this veil is lifted, it may chance also that you will find what shall send your souls shivering to despair and madness. Say, are you not afraid?"

(To Be Continued Next Sunday.)